

American conservatism 1945-1995

IRVING KRISTOL

THE *Public Interest* was born well before the term “neoconservative” was invented, and will—I trust—be alive and active when the term is of only historical interest. That time may even be now, as the distinction between conservative and neoconservative has been blurred almost beyond recognition. Still, the distinction has not yet been entirely extinguished—it still turns up when Jeane Kirkpatrick’s views on foreign policy are mentioned—so this may be a suitable moment to look back and define the role that neoconservatism, and *The Public Interest* specifically, has played in the history of American conservatism since the end of World War II. (A quite different, but equally useful, essay could be written on its role in the history of postwar liberalism.)

In that half-century, as I see it, American conservatism has gone through three stages.

First there was the renewal of what might be called traditional conservatism, centered around William F. Buckley’s *National Review* and having the goal of reprogramming the Re-

publican party into a solidly conservative political instrument. This led to the nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the ensuing electoral debacle. That debacle, however, had the result of consolidating and expanding conservative influence within the Republican party. This is not as paradoxical as it appears. After all, the comparable debacle of McGovern's defeat in 1972 resulted in the left wing of American liberalism, whose candidate he was, gaining effective control of the Democratic party. Inner-party dynamics can be far more important than election results, on which the media and public attention naturally focus.

Second, there was the influence of the neoconservative impulse. Originally, this impulse looked to the Democratic party for political expression, but by the mid-1970s that was obviously an expectation difficult to sustain, and a gradual, often reluctant, shift toward the Republican party got under way. (There are still quite a few Democratic neoconservatives, most of whom by now quietly vote Republican.) *The Public Interest* was the focal point of this neoconservative impulse, though much of its impact was the result of its influence on the younger men and women who were ensconced in the editorial and "op-ed" departments of the *Wall Street Journal*. Neoconservatism differed in many important respects from traditional conservatism, but had no program of its own. Basically, it wanted the Republican party to cease playing defensive politics, to be forward-looking rather than backward-looking. Some of us actually dared to suggest that the party should be more "ideological," although "ideology" is not a term pleasing to American ears. In the end, the notion of an activist "agenda" has become ever more integral to Republican political thinking, doing the work of "ideology" though in a peculiarly pragmatic American way. The substance of any specific agenda may not have much to do with neoconservatism, but the moving spirit does.

Third, there has been the emergence, over the past decades, of religion-based, morally concerned, political conservatism. In the long run, this may be the most important of all. Though the media persist in portraying the religious conservatives as aggressive fanatics, in fact their motivation has been primarily defensive—a reaction against the popular counter-

culture, against the doctrinaire secularism of the Supreme Court, and against a government that taxes them heavily while removing all traces of morality and religion from public education, for example, even as it subsidizes all sorts of activities and programs that are outrages against traditional morality. The religious faith behind this reaction has been steadily gaining in both intensity and popularity, especially among Protestant evangelicals, and may well now have a dynamism of its own. It is not at all unimaginable that the United States is headed for a bitter and sustained *Kulturkampf* that could overwhelm conventional notions of what is and what is not political.

Let me look at the evolution of postwar conservatism from the perspective of a neoconservative.

II

When *National Review* was founded in 1955, I regarded it as an eccentricity on the ideological landscape—it seemed so completely out of phase. Essentially it continued the polemic against the New Deal that characterized American conservatism, as represented by the Republican party, throughout the 1930s and 1940s. As a child of the depression who was outraged at the spectacle of idle factories, unused resources, and vast unemployment all coexisting, I could not take seriously the seemingly blind faith in “free enterprise” that was the primal certainty of *National Review*. I simply found this point of view irrelevant. So did practically everyone else at the time—at least the “everyone else” I knew or read.

To some aspects of the conservative message I was certainly vulnerable, even then. Though a liberal, I had never been enamored with those beliefs that constituted an orthodox liberal outlook. Thus, I had always been in favor of capital punishment. I never believed that criminality could be “cured” by therapeutic treatment. I never doubted that school prayer was a perfectly sensible idea. I was convinced that the “basics”—rote learning and memorization—offered the young the best opportunity for learning. I thought that “sexual permissiveness,” in all its guises, was an absurd idea. I regarded the ideal of a “world without war” as utopian, and “making the world safe for democracy” a futile enterprise. So I could hon-

estly say that I would welcome the appearance of a conservative magazine—a magazine that was reflective (in the Burke-Tocqueville tradition), one that would help refine and elevate public discourse. What I meant, I now suspect, was that I would welcome a conservative magazine that was not overly offensive to liberal sensibilities, a magazine that did not aim to destroy liberalism but to complement it.

National Review was certainly not that. It was brash, even vulgar in its antiliberal polemics. There was something collegiate—sophomoric, to be blunt—about its high-spiritedness, and its general tone was anti-intellectual. Above all, it seemed to me simple-minded in its “anti-statism” in general and its contempt for all social reforms in particular. There is little doubt that its “anti-statism” revived, for a lot of people, even younger people, the dormant nerves of anti-New Deal fervor. Ten years earlier, the popularity of Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* had already signified the possibility of such a revival. But I had not read that book—and though I have come to admire his later writings in political philosophy and intellectual history, I still haven’t read it. The reason is that I did not believe for a moment that the American people would allow themselves to be seduced or coerced along any such path. I deemed that kind of “anti-statism” to be a species of political hysteria, and I felt its reaction to the New Deal excessive. So I did not take *National Review* seriously as a political journal.

Which, it turns out, was a mistake—the kind of mistake that intellectuals are especially prone to make in politics. We say, repeatedly, that ideas have consequences, which is true but what we have in mind are complex, thoughtful, and well-articulated ideas. What we so easily overlook is the fact that simple ideas, allied to passion and organization, also have consequences. *National Review*, it turns out, was part of a larger movement that created institutions which shaped and trained several thousand young conservatives, not so much to go forth and proclaim the gospel, as to go into the Republican party and gain control of it. This they did, most effectively, over the next decade. The result was that it was Goldwater, and not Nelson Rockefeller, who was the Republican party’s nominee in 1964. Nor did Goldwater’s defeat change the reality that

liberal Republicanism had suffered a mortal wound and the Eastern, "establishment" wing of the party had yielded dominance to the conservative wing. The Nixon years were a troubled time of transition, and for the younger conservatives in that administration it was a disaster. But the course had been set. It was the *National Review* idol Ronald Reagan who won the nomination in 1980, and today—despite the George Bush interregnum—the Republican party is unquestionably a conservative party. But what kind of conservative party? Much has happened since those early years in the 1950s, and the conservatism of *National Review* has largely been reshaped by the emergence of new currents of conservative thought.

III

One such current was what came to be called "neoconservatism," and its origins can be traced to the founding of *The Public Interest* 30 years ago. Not that the founders of this journal had any such political goal. We were all liberals, of a kind, in 1965. But it turned out that most of us were the kind of liberals who were destined to play a role in the conservative revival.

The dozen or so scholars and intellectuals who were the nucleus of the new venture were in a state of dissatisfaction with the liberal temper of the age. But at that time, the conservatism of *National Review* interested us not at all. There were many points of repulsion but it was NRs primordial (as we saw it) hostility to the New Deal that created a gulf between us and them. We were all children of the depression, most of us from lower-middle-class or working-class families, a significant number of us urban Jews for whom the 1930s had been years of desperation, and we felt a measure of loyalty to the spirit of the New Deal if not to all its programs and policies. Nor did we see it as representing any kind of "statist" or socialist threat to the American democracy. As James Q. Wilson, one of the "founding fathers," recently wrote in the *New Republic* (May 22, 1995):

American liberalism, like America in general, is different. Created by the New Deal but drawing on features of the earlier Progressive movement, liberalism here, unlike the liberalism found in many European nations, never took seriously the idea of na-

tionalizing major industries, only occasionally and then without much conviction proposed any major distribution of income, and merely flirted with centralized economic planning. A welfare state was created, but compared to the welfare state in many other industrialized nations, the American version offered less generous benefits to the unemployed, provided no children's allowances and restricted tax-supported medical care to veterans, the elderly and the very poor.

All of us had ideas on how to improve, even reconstruct, this welfare state—we were meliorists, not opponents, and only measured critics. It was when the Great Society programs were launched that we began to distance ourselves, slowly and reluctantly, from the newest version of official liberalism.

But it was not only the Great Society that affected us. The *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s was, in retrospect, really quite bizarre. "Automation," for instance, was a prime bogeyman, as was the corollary prospect of a "push-button society" in which workers would experience a surfeit of leisure they were not equipped to handle. The Ford Foundation and other trendy institutions had many conferences and sponsored many books on "the problem of leisure," while Lyndon Johnson appointed a Commission on Automation. Fortunately, Daniel Bell was on that commission and, together with Robert Solow of M.I.T., he composed a sensible report. This experience with the Automation-Leisure scare moved Dan Bell and myself to contemplate the founding of this magazine. Someone, we felt, had to continue talking modest sense, even if grandiose nonsense was temporarily so very popular.

The tone of *The Public Interest*, from the outset, was skeptical, pragmatic, meliorist. We were especially provoked by the widespread acceptance of left-wing sociological ideas that were incorporated in the War on Poverty. The most egregious such idea was the Community Action Program, which would mobilize the urban poor, especially the black poor, to "fight city hall," literally. The prescribed cure for poverty was defined as militant political action, even revolutionary political action, that would result in the redistribution of income and wealth. This idea, spawned by the Jacobins in the French Revolution, has probably been the most popular and pernicious belief of the past two centuries, distorting expectations

and destroying the economies of many a Third World country. We at *The Public Interest*, having known poverty at first hand—the authors of the War on Poverty were mainly upper-middle-class types—and witnessing the ways poverty was overcome in reality, by gradual economic growth with the concomitant growth of economic opportunity, were utterly contemptuous of this idea. And our attitude had surprising echoes in unexpected places.

The reason was that most of us were social scientists, and as Pat Moynihan put it, the best use of social science is to refute false social science. Since we live in an age when “experts” are overvalued, the social science in *The Public Interest* had its effect. Actually, one could have reached the same, sound conclusions from the study of history, or even just looking, not at people mired in poverty, but at those poor people who had managed to move out of poverty—people who were all around us. But that’s not the kind of testimony that Congressional committees and the media were looking for.

As *The Public Interest* continued on its modest way, at first with a circulation of 2,000 to 3,000, all sorts of portentous things were happening around us—which made us feel, and made us appear to be, more conservative than we had anticipated. One was the student rebellion of the late 1960s, a rebellion aimed primarily at the liberal professoriate—the small minority of conservative professors were largely ignored. This assault reminded many liberal professors that their liberalism had implicit limits, beyond which lay some quite conservative assumptions about the nature of authority in general, and in a university in particular. There is nothing like the utopian idiocies of the extreme left—the “infantile” left, as Lenin called it—to stir thoughts of moderation among the centrist majority. And from such thoughts of moderation, some second thoughts about the implications of moderation are bound to develop, and these second thoughts will always, in that context or that situation, turn out to involve a conservative modification of the original liberalism.

The student rebellion had, of course, close ties with the emerging counterculture, which set out to scandalize and delegitimize the regnant liberalism in its own bold and brash way. Liberal professors and liberal intellectuals liked, at that

time, to think of themselves as "broad-minded," but they were nevertheless shocked. It's one thing to give scholarly approval to historical, sociological, and psychological studies that demonstrated our conventional family structure to be less universal, more "culture bound," than one had realized. It is quite another thing to see one's children enticed into sexual promiscuity, drugs, and suicide. The liberal professoriate, and many members of the intellectual community, had always kept its distance from "bourgeois society," and always tried to be "objective" about bourgeois mores. Now, a great many discovered, albeit reluctantly, that they had been bourgeois all along.

Soon, *The Public Interest* no longer stood alone. *Commentary*, which had for some years flirted with the left, veered sharply in a neoconservative direction. Even more important was the arrival of Robert Bartley as editor of the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. He quickly melded the familiar anti-statist views of the *Journal* with the neoconservative critique of contemporary liberalism. This trio of publications suddenly became something like a national force, and politicians and editorial writers began to pay attention.

What kind of force was it? It is not easy, even in retrospect, to answer that question in a crisp and clear way. I would say that there were three distinctive aspects to the neoconservative "movement" (a rather grandiose term, given its modest dimensions). First, the political tonality was different. This was surely the result of our liberal heritage, which predisposed us to be forward-looking, not in any sense dour and reactionary. I once remarked, semi-facetiously, that to be a neoconservative one had to be of a cheerful disposition, no matter how depressing the current outlook. In America all successful politics is the politics of hope, a mood not noticeable in traditional American conservatism. The way to win, in politics as in sport, is to think of yourself as a winner. The pathos of being proved right, while losing, is always a great temptation to a conservative minority in opposition.

Secondly, it follows that our natural impulse was melioristic. From the outset, I was mindful of the injunction of my first editor at *Commentary*, Elliot Cohen, that you can't beat a horse with no horse. Even while being critical of the Great Society, *The Public Interest* was always interested in propos-

ing alternate reforms, alternate legislation, that would achieve the desired aims more securely, and without the downside effects. This was something that did not much interest traditional conservatism, with its emphatic "anti-statist" focus. The difference also had something to do with the fact that traditional conservatives had many distinguished economists in their ranks, and economics is above all the science of limits, a great nay-saying enterprise. Among the core social scientists around *The Public Interest* there were no economists. (They came later, as we "matured.") This explains my own rather cavalier attitude toward the budget deficit and other monetary or fiscal problems. The task, as I saw it, was to create a new majority, which evidently would mean a conservative majority, which came to mean, in turn, a Republican majority—so political effectiveness was the priority, not the accounting deficiencies of government.

Thirdly, neoconservatives—at least the New Yorkers among them—came out of an intellectual milieu, in which some large ideas—i.e., ideas with a philosophic or ideological dimension—were taken very seriously. This was of little significance in the early years of neoconservatism, but it did become very important as the nation found itself in a third stage of postwar conservative history, a stage in which religious conservatism became an active force in American politics.

IV

Active religion-based conservatism did not become a political force in the United States because of either religion or conservatism. Its activism was provoked by militant liberalism and the militant secularism associated with it. This liberalism and this secularism, in the postwar years, came to dominate the Democratic party, the educational establishment, the media, the law schools, the judiciary, the major schools of divinity, the bishops of the Catholic Church, and the bureaucracies of the "mainline" Protestant denominations. One day, so to speak, millions of American Christians—most of them, as it happens, registered Democrats—came to the realization that they were institutionally isolated and impotent. They quite naturally wanted their children to be raised as well-behaved Christians but discovered that their authority over their own

children had been subverted and usurped by an aggressive, secular liberalism that now dominated our public education system and our popular culture. They looked at our high schools and saw that gay and lesbian organizations were free to distribute their literature to the students but that religious organizations were not. They saw condoms being distributed to adolescent teenagers while the Supreme Court forbade the posting of the Ten Commandments on the classroom wall. And so they rebelled and did the only thing left for them to do—they began to organize politically. In so doing they may very well have initiated a sea-change in American politics and American life.

Inevitably, the conservative Christians began to seek links with traditional conservatives, since they shared common enemies—liberal government, a left-liberal educational establishment, a judiciary besotted with liberal dogmas. But this alliance worked smoothly only up to a point. The trouble with traditional conservatism, especially those segments dominated by a purely economic conservatism, was that it tended to be libertarian and even secular-minded when it came to the kinds of moral and social issues that agitated Christian conservatives. There is an important difference between the kind of “liberty” dear to the hearts of economic conservatives and leaders of the business community, and the “ordered liberty” that any serious religion would have in mind. This contradiction became obvious in Ronald Reagan’s appointees to the Federal Communications Commission, men who were enthusiastic about deregulation but indifferent about opening the doors to pornography. That same contradiction is today glaringly obvious within the Republican party, which economic conservatives have dominated ever since the post-Civil War period.

Oddly enough, the Christian conservatives found it easier to get along with the neoconservatives, many of whom come from an intellectual background and an intellectual milieu that is more concerned with criticizing liberalism than with criticizing “statism.” It was primarily the neoconservative criticism of welfare for corrupting the souls of its recipients, as against the traditional conservative emphasis on the waste of taxpayers’ money, that helped make welfare reform a major issue for religious conservatives. Similarly, the troubled condition of

the modern family was a concern of both secular neoconservatives and Christian conservatives, before it became a popular conservative topic. Not that this now matters all that much, since the merger of neoconservatism and traditional conservatism, underway since the election of Ronald Reagan, is largely complete. Even the term, "neoconservative," is not much used, "conservative" now having stretched its meaning to be more inclusive. But today's traditional, libertarian, economically focused conservatives are still strong enough to win local or state-wide elections and to dominate the United States Senate. This is a source of constant irritation to Christian conservatives.

So the assimilation of Christian conservatives into American conservatism is still in its relatively early stages, and it is creating serious tensions. To some degree, this is because Christian conservatism is a "movement," not simply a political party, and like all movements of this kind it has its various factions, some of whom are more committed to demonstrating the steadfastness of their Christian faith than to exercising political influence. To some degree, too, the secular temper of the business community—not densely populated by Bible-reading types—has a powerful grip on the Republican political imagination, as well as on its finances. It is even possible that Christian conservatism will fragment into new political parties. The conventional political wisdom, wedded to our two-party system, would assume that this would mark the political demise of Christian conservatism. That is possible. But it is also possible that the two-party system, however deeply rooted in our history, is not going to be with us forever.

In any case, I think it is probably an error to focus so narrowly on the role of Christian conservatism in American politics. The born-again Christian impulse is, above all, a religious impulse that looks well beyond any political horizon. It is my sense that this impulse will grow in the years ahead, whatever the political fortunes or misfortunes of Christian political conservatism. We have lived through a century of ever more extreme hedonism, antinomianism, personal and sexual individualism, licentiousness (as it used to be called), and no one who has bothered to read a bit of history ought to be surprised if it culminates in some kind of aggressive reli-

gious awakening. So the rise of Christian political conservatism may turn out to be a prelude to something far more important, involving the place of religion in American life, including American public life. Just what form this renewed religious impulse will take no one can foresee. We—all of us—could be in for some shocking surprises.